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ABSTRACT

Although schools in many countries have initiated mass media education, American schools still give little consideration to any systematic study of the mass media. Students are particularly in need of learning how to apply basic critical viewing concepts to watching television, the most powerful and ubiquitous of the mass media. Most researchers and scholars advocate formal media education for high school students, arguing that it would make for better informed citizens, and that critical viewing will stimulate critical thinking. (NKA)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON READING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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How to "Read" Television: Teaching Students to View TV Critically

Nola Kortner Aiex

In light of the current explosion of mass media products and technology, most education practitioners would probably agree about the urgent need for students to develop critical viewing abilities along with critical thinking abilities.

At the close of UNESCO's 1982 International Symposium on Media Education, the representatives of the 19 countries in attendance issued a unanimous declaration that called upon competent authorities to "initiate and support comprehensive media education programs—from pre-school to university level, and in adult education—the purpose of which is to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes which will encourage the growth of critical awareness and, consequently, of greater competence among the users of electronic and print media. Ideally, such programs should include the analysis of media products, the use of media as means of creative expression, and effective use of and participation in available media channels. Training courses should be developed for teachers and intermediaries both to increase their knowledge and understanding of the media and train them in appropriate teaching methods." [Dwyer and Walshe, ED 250 651]

Although there is some evidence that media literacy programs are well underway in classrooms in many countries around the world, such as France, Switzerland, West Germany, England, and the Scandinavian countries [Gambiez, ED 243 408], as well as Australia [Dwyer and Walshe, ED 250 651], curricula in American schools still give little consideration to any systematic study of the ubiquitous mass media.

Media Study in High School

Sneed [CS 506 678] argues that the best time and place for students to begin a serious study of the media is in the high school social sciences curricula. English/Language Arts high school teachers surveyed by Koziol [CS 506 761] also felt that mass media education was better suited to a social studies department. In adolescence, young people become acutely aware of the vast and sometimes confusing array of mass media that permeate their lives.

For example, a recent study on the effects of television tested attitudes of students in grades 6-10 and found that older students were more balanced in their assessments of the influences of the medium, both positive and negative, than were their younger counterparts. These findings suggest that audiences in general, and young people in particular, are far more involved and mentally active when watching TV than has been previously thought. [Krendl and Lasky, ED 287 181] It follows that the public needs to develop skills that can help them better interpret and analyze a variety of video messages. Formal study of the media in high school will also make for better informed citizens. People must become critical viewers, particularly of television—"both the most powerful communication medium ever developed, and the most effective medium for reaching a great number of people simultaneously." [Metallinos, CS 506 658]

Critical Viewing Concepts

Sneed [CS 506 678] believes that the key component to media literacy is understanding the symbols, information, ideas, values, and messages that emanate from the media. O'Reilly and Splaine [ED 289 796] enumerate a number of basic critical viewing concepts which apply to all visual media, and especially TV: (1) the direction of the camera will affect how a particular scene is perceived; (2) a director can choose a camera position to impart almost any desired message; (3) even though the event is "live," the director can still "edit" the event by selecting which camera will portray the

CS 506 760

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event; and (4) after an event, the editor can juxtapose a series of images to convey virtually any desired message. In addition, most TV screens are small and provide an ill-defined image, a technical limitation which directly affects the content and methodology of the medium.

Models for Critical Viewing

Specific models for critical viewing of television have also been developed by O'Reilly and Splaine. Viewers should first ask themselves when watching television: what is this program's point of view, what inferences can be drawn from the program, what persuasive techniques are used, and what evidence is used to support the program's argument? After this initial questioning, separate models can be used for viewing news programs, political advertisements or debates, interviews, entertainment programs, sports, or commercials.

For example, the entertainment analysis model, VIPE, asks: V—What *values* does the program convey? I—Did the program *involve* the viewer? P—What *point* is the program making? E—What are the *emotional* appeals? A similar analysis model for commercials is called MAIL. MAIL asks: M—What was the *main point* of the commercial? A—What *appeals* did the advertiser use? I—What *images* were used to impart the advertiser's message? L—Will the commercial have a *long term* effect on the viewers? [O'Reilly and Splaine, ED 289 796] O'Reilly and Splaine also caution viewers to remember that commercial TV networks are profit-making businesses, that television thrives on simplicity and avoids complexity in program content, that the omnipresence of television makes most viewers more susceptible to its messages, and that commercial TV programs are generally aimed at the lowest common denominator.

Suggestions for Class Activities

A companion teacher's guide [O'Reilly and Splaine, ED 289 797] to "Critical Viewing: Stimulant to Critical Thinking" offers suggestions for in-class activities as well as longer-term projects and research papers that will interest students at the high school level. Dwyer and Walshe's guide, "Learning to Read the Media" [ED 250 651], developed for elementary school level students in Australia, can be adapted for almost any academic level. This teacher's guide presents over 100 classroom activity units to bring purpose and critical interactions to young persons' encounters with the mass media.

Ploghoft [ED 291 636] provides guidelines and techniques for focusing on TV news programming to help prepare students for their roles as citizens by developing the ability to distinguish between objective and subjective reporting. Among the goals of the suggested activities are for students to be able to (1) distinguish between local, national and international news; (2) analyze the TV news program as to the priorities given to news items; (3) compare and contrast the nightly newscasts of the three networks for the content, selection, and emphasis of the day's news; (4) establish their own criteria for local, state, national, and international news and to analyze the TV news using these criteria; (5) compare the TV news to newspapers and news magazines in terms of content, depth, emphasis, and objectivity; and (6) become aware of the process of news gathering on a local, state, national, and international level.

Implications for the Future

Mass media technology is shaping young people's lives far more than print, and for the traditional public school system to avoid withering, it must take an active role in helping students interpret television imagery. Contrary to some claims, the significance of imagery as an intellectual tool for understanding concepts and processes will not reduce the importance of print in a literacy intensive future environment. Both forms of reading will take on even greater importance, both in the "real" world and the educational world. Print, however, will no longer be considered sacred, and pictures will acquire a newfound respectability. The result will be a more active and rigorous process of teaching and learning. [Adams, ED 260 371]

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